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Stormy Weather: Lena Horne, Dorothy Dandridge and the Cultural Politics of Stardom

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STORMY WEATHER: LENA HORNE, DOROTHY
DANDRIDGE AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF
STARDOM

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the American Studies Program

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

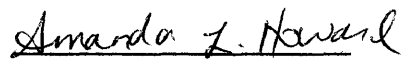
Amanda L. Howard

1999

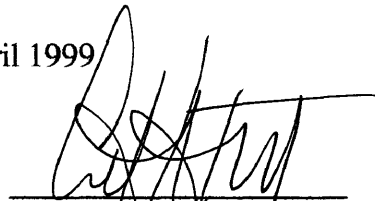
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
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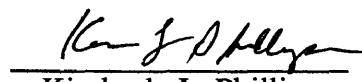

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I examine Lena Horne's and Dorothy Dandridge's stardom in the 1940's and 1950's. As African-American actresses, Horne and Dandridge faced many barriers on their way to stardom, including racism and society's long held notion of black females as sexually promiscuous. Despite these obstacles, Horne and Dandridge posed a challenge to racism inside and outside of Hollywood by rising to international stardom and negotiating their star images for political gain.

While Horne and Dandridge shared similarities as African-American stars working in a white-controlled industry, they responded to their stardom differently. Horne, ripping up her seven-year contract with M-G-M, broke away from Hollywood and became an African-American star who used her international fame to push for racial equality. Represented by the black press as a sophisticated lady, Horne was held up as a role model. Dandridge, operating within the white Hollywood star system, battled racism by aiming to become a successful actress. Catapulted to fame with her Academy Award nominated role as Carmen in Carmen Jones (1954), Dandridge found it difficult to maintain her success with the lack of roles for black leading ladies. Represented by the black and white press as a love-goddess, Dandridge attempted to manipulate her sexy image to achieve success.

Celebrated today for their musical and acting talents, Horne and Dandridge served in their respective decades not only as performers, but also as political activists. Horne, through explicit activism, and Dandridge, by pushing the confines of the white star system, emerged as racial and gender rebels during a time of intense racial segregation and limited roles for women.

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In 1942 a poised singing star took her seat, reserved by Duke Ellington, in the 1,600-seat Mayan Theater in Los Angeles. Lena Horne had just moved to Los Angeles from New York and was doubting her decision to live in Hollywood. What “saved her sanity” during this confusing time was the “fact that Duke Ellington and his band were appearing in LA in a show Duke had written, *Jump for Joy*.”¹ Ellington’s stage musical, one of the few created and produced on the West Coast, was an unusual collection of songs and satirical skits that challenged the racial stereotypes used by Broadway and Hollywood. Ahead of its time, *Jump for Joy* was, in the words of Ellington, “an attempt to correct the race situation in the USA through a form of theatrical propaganda.”²

During the evening Horne watched a lithe eighteen-year old named Dorothy Dandridge, deemed the hit of the show by the *California Eagle*, perform skits and croon numbers such as “Brown Skinned Gal in the Calico Gown,” “Hickory Stick,” and “Cindy With Two Left Feet” among others.³ That night at the Mayan Theater the two most famous African-American female stars during the two decades preceding the Civil Rights Act were brought together. Horne--already a singing star and one year away from her first major Hollywood production, *Cabin In the Sky*, and Dandridge--a performer since age five who was beginning to receive the attention of newspapers, critics, and other Hollywood performers-- did not meet that night. Nonetheless, the symbolism of their

¹ Lena Horne and Richard Schickel, *Lena* (Garden City: Double Day, 1965), 122.

² Donald Bogle, *Dorothy Dandridge: A Biography* (New York: Boulevard Books, 1997), 87-88. Ellington quote from Duke Ellington’s *Music is My Mistress*.

presence at the same event is not lost; Dandridge as performer and Horne as spectator came together for a production that attempted to debunk the racial stereotypes and barriers that both women would continually battle throughout their careers.⁴

As black female singers and actresses, Horne and Dandridge faced many obstacles on their way to stardom. Working during a period of segregation and intense discrimination against African-Americans, they had to contend with racism as well as notions about black females' sexuality--the deeply entrenched stereotype that black women were sexually promiscuous continued to dominate. Despite these limiting forces, each woman posed a challenge to racism inside and outside of Hollywood by rising to international stardom in their respective decades--Horne in the 1940's and Dandridge in the 1950's. These women's individual responses to stardom, shaped by their race, gender, and class, serve as examples of both resistance to and reappropriation of the white Hollywood star system.

Lena Horne's and Dorothy Dandridge's star images survive today in varying degrees in popular memory. Horne, still cutting records, appears in the press as an "unsinkable star" who achieved fame despite the strictures of Hollywood and who openly practiced her politics through participation in the civil rights movement.⁵ Dandridge, dead for over thirty years and largely forgotten until the 1997 publication of Donald Bogle's popular biography, hovers in the public mind as a tragic star who died young. While these representations provide a starting point for thinking about Horne's and

³ Ibid, 90.

⁴ It is arguable that Lena Horne no longer has to face these barriers. For the purpose of this paper, I will be referring to and addressing Horne's career from 1941-1966 unless otherwise noted.

Dandridge's fame, a closer examination of their stardom yields a more complicated view. Remembered on multiple levels, as actresses, singers, divorcees, mothers, and light-skinned beauties, Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge ultimately proved themselves all of these things---and more. Negotiating their stardom in different ways, Horne and Dandridge broke new ground not only by becoming stars in a white-dominated system but also by mediating the maze of stardom to promote equality for blacks. Horne, balking against the limitations of white Hollywood, thrived in an alternative black star system that enabled her to openly support racial and gender equality through active participation in organizations, fund-raising events, and interviews. Dandridge, working within the Hollywood system, implicitly battled racial discrimination through her aspiration to become a successful black actress in the 1950's.

Manipulating their stardom for political gains at a time when American society only approved of white males as celebrity activists, Horne and Dandridge broke new ground by challenging the Hollywood and larger societal hierarchy which relegated black women to the bottom. Stepping into the domain of white male stars, Horne and Dandridge transgressed racial and gender boundaries in their attempt to create an equal space for African-Americans in white Hollywood and in American society. Horne, through explicit political activism, and Dandridge, by pushing the confines of the white star system, emerged as racial and gender rebels during a time of intense racial segregation and limited roles for women.

⁵ In 1998 at age 81, Horne sang in a Gap commercial and released a new jazz album, *Being Myself*. Recent articles on Horne, including the 1998 People bio-piece devote space to her activism in the civil rights movement. People Weekly (July 6, 1998), 121.

In thinking about Horne and Dandridge as political figures who manipulated their stardom, it is important to fully consider the construction of their star images and how each woman used them. By examining the intertwined private and public images of Horne and Dandridge as represented by the black and white press and through their biographies and autobiographies, a complex picture of how these women negotiated stardom over time begins to emerge. In analyzing their star images the following questions require consideration: How did Horne and Dandridge represent themselves as stars? How did the black and white press present them as stars and what is the significance of these constructions? Did Horne's and Dandridge's star images fit in or chafe against white societal notions of sexuality as expressed through images of white stars? Finally, I hope to uncover the differences between Horne's and Dandridge's responses to stardom and to consider how they participated in and/or resisted the mainstream model of the Hollywood star system in pursuing their personal and political goals.

Stardom

Before beginning to examine Horne and Dandridge as stars, it is important to consider the concept of stardom. While it seems a moot point to establish that Horne and Dandridge were stars, it is not frivolous to investigate how and why stars are--stars. In 1957, Ebony provided an informal but expert explanation of stardom. A group of agents, writers and other "titans of the industry" from LA, Chicago, and Broadway, in search of an answer for what makes a star, listed ten elements of stardom; these included talent, experience and training, perseverance, publicity and contracts, driving ambition, and star

quality which is “indefinable.”⁶ Using these elements as a yardstick, the panel named Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge as two eminent African-American stars.

While the Ebony article touches on some of the qualities of stardom, the “indescribable quality” continues to raise questions. What is it about stars that cause people to fall over each other to see them, to consume the details of their lives in tabloids and on television, and to feel a close, personal connection with them? How do stars form and maintain their identities? In unpacking these questions Richard Dyer, the pioneering scholar on stardom, begins to uncover the complexities noting that “Stars articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society, that is, they express the particular notion we hold of the person, of the ‘individual.’”⁷ The act of affirming individuality, however, is not simple--rather, it is a complex challenge. Consequently, stars, because they are human “articulate both the promise and the difficulty that the notion of individuality presents for all of us who live by it.”⁸

Balancing between personal and public selves, stars fashion their publicized images while still essentially turning to their inner, “private” self to form the basis of their identity. Yet because of the intense scrutiny stars undergo, their ‘private’ lives often become part of their star persona. In the face of proliferating media expóses on stars’ “real” lives, stars often purposefully divulge information about their private lives to maintain or strengthen their public persona. As media scholar Joshua Meyrowitz points

⁶ “What Makes a Star?”, Ebony, (November 1957): 143. The other elements listed included promotion, luck of breaks, uniqueness, distinctive sounds, intelligence, and hit records.

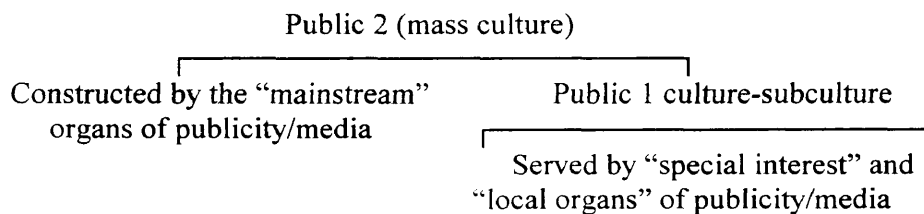
⁷ Richard Dyer, Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society (New York: St. Martins, 1986), 8.

⁸ Ibid.

out, a celebrity's only recourse is "to develop an ever increasing secret 'deep backstage' [private live] that is truly private."⁹

Whether peppering their star image with private details or not, a star's role is ultimately to "be about the business of being in public."¹⁰ The public self forms the basis of the star image and is remade again and again through the media, interviews, performances, critiques, posters, biographies, etc. Stars embody the complex dichotomy of the private/public and the individual/society making an assessment of the "real" person indistinguishable from their multiple images. To understand Horne's and Dandridge's stardom, one has to investigate the complex constructions of their public and private identities and question how the private "authentic" self, marked by their gender and race, is represented in public. In doing so the strands of selfhood and image, performance and "behind-the-scenes" facts run together to form intricate star identities.

While the multiplicity of star images applies to stars of all races, a look at African-American stardom renders a more complicated analysis. On one level, African-American stars' images split into two groups; one, which I have labeled Public 1, represents culture and sub-culture while my other label, Public 2, will stand for mass culture.



⁹ Joshua Meyrowitz, No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior quoted in Jib Fowies Starstruck: Celebrity Performers and the American Public (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1992), 117.

For African-American performers the dichotomy between the Public 1 and the Public 2 presents a double bind. African-American culture, operating as a sub-culture, emphasizes communal culture as the center of authenticity while mass (white) culture, Public 2, values the individual. Racism adds additional complications for African-American celebrities. Black performers willing to qualify their black cultural identity to strive for mass appeal are prohibited from doing so in a racist society. At the same time, for Horne, Dandridge, and other African-American performers, the problem of not being black enough for African-American audiences or being too black for white audiences creates another barrier to reaching stardom. Horne's and Dandridge's light complexion further complicates the double bind as the stars' skin color itself creates ambivalence and confusion about classifying their race. Considering the complexities of the star image raises the questions of if, when, and how blackness can survive as an identity under the constraints of pervasive "whitening" mass culture ideology.

By focusing on an alternative star system for African-Americans in "Star Dances; African American Constructions of Stardom- 1925-1960," Arthur Knight begins to unpack some of these questions. Focusing on the most marked period of racial discrimination against African-Americans in the twentieth century, Knight emphasizes the importance of black community and culture that grew in response to racist strictures.¹¹ Out of this community came stars and spectators that formed an alternative model of stardom which often offered a critique of the Hollywood star system. Knight argues the social, economic, and cultural circumstances of the black audience for mass and popular

¹⁰ Dyer, 13.

¹¹ Arthur Knight, "Star Dances: African-American Constructions of Stardom, 1925-1960," 4.

culture “require broadening and also specializing the meaning of ‘star’ and ‘stardom’.”¹²

Defined within “a different set of values and constraints,” black stardom opened new possibilities for African-American stars’ identities.¹³

Unlike Dyer’s mainstream paradigm of stardom in which a star ascends to individual fame, the African-American model involves a series of moves outward and back again that emphasize the individual in relation to the community. Likening the African-American alternative model of stardom to the star dance derived from West Africa, Knight argues that in African-American culture(s) the star dance suggests “a star can emerge (from) within a community, perform a turn, and then return--at which time a new star, called by and responding to the previous star, will take a turn.”¹⁴ This metaphorical turn involves a simultaneous move to the center of the communal and cultural circle and emphasizes the quality of the individual’s performance. Because the individual turn is different from and cognate with the mainstream notion of stardom, it reveals a black community identity while simultaneously opening an important space for black assimilation and white acceptance.¹⁵ The questions for the black star then become will he/she remain within the circle? Or will the star continue to ascend completely out of the circle and into mainstream stardom--or, more likely given white prejudice, will such an ascent end up stuck somewhere between the two realms?¹⁶

Horne’s and Dandridge’s stardom offer two different trajectories of African-American stardom that resulted in different routes to pursuing political space for blacks.

¹² Ibid, 6.

¹³ Ibid, 7.

¹⁴ Ibid, 20.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Horne returned to the circle of the black community which she struggled to strengthen and expand. Subverting the white Hollywood star system by working within established modes of representation while simultaneously rejecting the establishment, Horne emerged as an African-American star. Dandridge, playing within the bounds of the white star system moved outside the circle, attempting to fill the gap between black and white stardom through integration.

Bearing in mind the tensions between the African-American star model and the white Hollywood star system, I will examine Horne and Dandridge's multiple star images and the ways in which they attempted to manipulate them in an effort to create space for blacks in racist America. Instead of investigating how these stars were received by black audiences, I aim to uncover their relationship with the white star system and the black community by studying representations of self. In their historical moment, how did these women fashion their images in order to participate in and/or resist the Hollywood system? In creating their images how did their race, class, and gender shape their mediation of stardom? Finally, how did they use their stardom for political gain? An overview of the women's lives provides a starting point for thinking about these questions.

Star Material

In considering Horne and Dandridge's stardom, a brief look at the women's lives reveals a number of crucial similarities and differences that helped shape their individual responses to the white Hollywood star system. Lena Horne was born into a close-knit African-American middle-class family from the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn; historically the Horne family was considered a part of the minuscule group known as the

“old black bourgeoisie.”¹⁷ Horne’s mother, Edna, was an unsuccessful actress who later pushed her daughter into show business. Lena’s father Teddy walked out when she was three. With Teddy gone, Edna found living with his parents difficult and decided “to run away from Brooklyn, motherhood, and marriage” a few months after his departure.¹⁸ Spending her early years living with her paternal grandparents, Horne observed the marked activism of her grandmother Cora. Cora, a “tiny woman, with very fair skin and gray-streaked hair,” who was deemed “a black aristocrat,” was active in the Urban League, the NAACP and the Suffragette movement.¹⁹ Under her grandmother’s tutelage, Horne was exposed at an early age to political activism. She has vivid memories of accompanying her grandmother to meetings of various organizations and “sitting quietly listening because [she] knew [she] would be questioned later.”²⁰ Horne’s exposure to activism shaped her beliefs and her political stance later became an integral part of her star persona.

Serving as the most dominant force in Horne’s early life, Cora also disciplined Lena to sit-up straight, speak clearly, be polite to others, and to use her “brains.”²¹ Decades later Horne, at 78, underscored how well she had learned her grandmother’s etiquette lessons when she commented on how she had mellowed since her early battles against racial discrimination: “I guess it wasn’t such a tough life after all...And I’m sorry I didn’t act like *a lady* [emphasis mine] about the whole thing.”²² As will be shown in the next section, the black press, as well as other performers continually viewed and

¹⁷ Gail Lumet Buckley, The Hornes: An American Family (New York: Knopf, 1986): 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 94.

¹⁹ Horne, 9.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 11.

²¹ Buckley, 84.

represented Horne as nothing other than a lady, a fact which has important implications for her image within the dominant Hollywood paradigm and the African-American community.

After living with her grandparents for several years, Horne left New York and joined her mother in Harlem. They soon moved to the South where Edna left Lena with different caretakers while she went looking for work. These times were often painful as Horne was beaten by one caretaker and lived in poverty with another. Eventually she settled with her mother and step-father in New York City. Having always hoped that her daughter would succeed in show business where she had failed, Edna Horne urged Lena to begin performing--her husband did not have a job and the family desperately needed money. Left without the guidance or financial assistance of Cora who had passed away a year earlier, Horne auditioned at Harlem's Cotton Club and at age 16 made her professional debut there working three shows a night to support her family.²³ She later began touring with various dance bands and landed her first big break with the integrated Charlie Barnet band in 1940. By this time Horne was becoming well-known for her performances, appearing on Broadway twice and making the race-film The Duke is Tops (1938) with race-film star Ralph Cooper. At the age of 23, the young performer found herself legally separated from Louis Jones (they were married in 1937) and the mother of

²² Beverly Lauderdale, "The Lady Lived the Blues; the Survival and Triumph of Lena Horne" Biography, (February 1998), 65.

²³ Before Cora's death, Edna had cut ties with most of the Horne family. She even went as far as ordering Lena not to attend Cora's funeral. Lena disobeyed her mother and ran from their new apartment in Brooklyn to the funeral home. According to Gail Lumet Buckley, this incident, coupled with Edna's marriage to Miguel Rodriguez, a white Cuban army officer, was the "final straw" for Edwin (Lena's grandfather), and the black middle-class community of Brooklyn. Buckley claims that despite, or because of her mother's errant behavior, the Brooklyn community seemed to take Lena under its wing for a time. Nonetheless, Edna seemingly cut herself off from the Horne family leaving her own family in difficult financial straits.

two children, Gail and Teddy. Already a prominent musical performer, Horne's black star was beginning to shine. As she edged toward Hollywood, Horne aligned herself with the black community, a move she would make repeatedly throughout her career as an African-American star.

Arriving in Hollywood in 1942, Horne, with the help of the NAACP, became the first African-American to sign a contract with a major Hollywood studio, MGM. Pushing for expanded roles for African-Americans, Horne shunned playing stereotypical parts like maids and mammies. She appeared in several films in the 1940's, including Cabin in the Sky (1943), Stormy Weather(1943),and Broadway Rhythm(1944).²⁴ Her best known roles were in Cabin in the Sky and Stormy Weather --in these films Horne made a break through of sorts by not playing a maid. In Cabin in the Sky she played the temptress Georgia Brown who attracts the attention of Little Joe Jackson(Eddie Anderson)and tries to woo him away from his God fearing wife Petunia (Ethel Waters). In the musical Stormy Weather , a loose dramatization of Robinson's life, Horne starred as Selina, Bill Robinson's love interest. While seemingly making headway in the roles she played, Horne also expressed frustration, saying later: "They didn't make me into a maid, but they didn't make me into anything else either."²⁵ In her other films, Horne was relegated to peripheral singing scenes that could easily be cut for Southern audiences.

Horne, in playing the role of the singer/entertainer on screen, appeared primarily as herself. With an identity tied in part to respectability, Horne's starring roles became invariably complicated as she remained herself, 'a lady', even as she portrayed a trouble-

²⁴ For a complete list of Horne's films and a more detailed account of her life see James Haskins' Lena; A Personal and Professional Biography of Lena Horne or Horne and Schickel's Lena.

making, coy, seductress. Instilling her characterizations of Georgia Brown and Selena with her own sense of self, Horne circumvented the system by resisting the characterization as a sex object. As Donald Bogle points out in Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks; An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film, when Lena Horne finally had the opportunity to play her two big starring roles in Cabin in the Sky and Stormy Weather, “the sex object syndrome (actually nothing more than the tragic mulatto without the tragedy) was carried a step further by casting her as exotic sirens.”²⁶ Bogle goes on to complicate this argument, saying that Horne, in taking on the role as sex object, resisted the characterization by proving herself “too much the lady to be believable as the slut.”²⁷ By infusing her characters with lady-like reserve, Horne remained herself on screen thus blurring the lines of her star identity. In doing so, she managed to subvert the Hollywood system by constructing herself--through her characters--as an object of contemplation rather than one of possession.²⁸

During the late 1940's Horne had repeated complications with MGM as she refused stereotypical roles and argued for autonomy in booking musical performances. Further problems with the studio erupted after Horne began seeing and later married Lennie Hayton, a white musician under contract at MGM. Their union registered criticism outside the studio as well, sparking a flurry of hate mail railing against the interracial marriage. By the end of the decade, Horne, frustrated with the limited roles for African-American women in Hollywood, canceled her seven year contract with MGM. Defining

²⁵ Donald Bogle, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films. (New York: Continuum, 1997): 127.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid. Hollywood collaborated with Horne's reserved characterization of Georgia Brown, cutting out her bubble bath scene in Cabin in the Sky.

herself as a musical performer, she moved outside of the Hollywood system and booked shows across America and Europe.²⁹ Leaving Hollywood behind, she positioned herself firmly in the African-American star system using her growing international fame to draw attention to racial discrimination in America.³⁰

Dorothy Dandridge, unlike Horne, was born into meager circumstances in Cleveland, Ohio in 1922. Her mother Ruby had left her father Cyril four months before Dorothy was born. Within the next few years Ruby moved several times because of financial difficulties--she was an actress desperately seeking work. Although she was drawn to the movies, Ruby recognized the best opportunities for her to perform were with Cleveland's network of churches and social groups.³¹ During her first four years of life, Dorothy watched her mother's performances and began reciting Ruby's dialogue around the house. Hoping for extra income, Ruby put Dorothy on stage to recite Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "In the Morning." Dorothy's career had begun.

Over the next twelve years Ruby and her partner Geneva Williams trained Dorothy and her older sister Vivian to perform acrobatic stunts, recitations, and skits. The girls, publicized as the Wonder Children, performed in black churches across the South. Traveling from city to city and serving as the breadwinners of the family, Dorothy

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ While Horne steadily gained world-wide fame through her early films and was hailed as a "movie star" into the early 1950's, she was known and represented by the press as a world-class singing star.

³⁰ Lena Horne, as an international star, has been honored with several awards throughout her life including the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Actress in a Musical and a Special Tony for "Lena Horne: The Lady and Her Music (1981), Grammys for Best Pop Vocal Performance for "Lena Horne: The Lady and Her Music-Live on Broadway" (1981) and Best Cast Show Album (1981), the Kennedy Center Lifetime Achievement Award (1984), National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences Lifetime Achievement Award (special Grammy 1989), and a Grammy for Jazz Vocal Performance for "An Evening with Lena Horne" (1995) among others.

³¹ Bogle, Dorothy Dandridge, 13.

and Vivian “were developing into pint-sized professionals.”³² These early years of performance were made increasingly difficult on the girls because of Geneva’s intermittent physical and verbal abuse.

After the stock-market crash of 1929, the Wonder Kids were unemployed. Ruby eventually moved the family to Los Angeles where Dorothy and Vivian began singing and dancing lessons. Joined by Etta Jones, Dorothy and Vivian formed a singing trio called The Dandridge Sisters. The youthful group made their debut at the Cotton Club in 1938, drawing attention from the press in New York and in other parts of the country.³³ At age eighteen Dorothy became tired of the trio and quit to go solo. A few months later she married the renowned dancer and Black film star, Harold Nicholas.³⁴

While she had gained attention for her work in the leftist stage shows *Jump For Joy* and *Meet the People* and had played in several movies in the 1940’s, it was not until the early 1950’s that Dorothy became a well-known star appearing in mainstream Hollywood productions. Praised for her sultry singing style in the US and Europe and attracting attention as a rising movie star in Tarzan’s Peril (1951) and Bright Road (1953), Dandridge was on her way to becoming “Hollywood’s No. 1 Negro female star.”³⁵ Her starring role in the 1954 Technicolor all-black cast musical Carmen Jones earned her the Academy nomination for Best Actress (she was the first African-American to be nominated for the award) and solidified her fame. Catapulted into the center of the Hollywood machine which only offered her a qualified acceptance, Dandridge had to find

³² Ibid, 20.

³³ Ibid, 65.

³⁴ For details on Dandridge’s marriage to Harold Nicholas and their child Harolyn see Donald Bogle’s Dorothy Dandridge: A Biography.

³⁵ “Dandridge Replaces Horne as Top Negro Cinema Star,” Ebony, (April 1953): 44.

a way to navigate the waters of the white star system. Often type-cast as a fiery, tragic mulatto in roles such as Carmen and the ill-fated prostitute Bess in Porgy and Bess, Dandridge had little space to break out and try other roles. As a proven leading lady she found limited opportunities to follow the cinematic formula requiring that she have an on-screen affair with a leading man. Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte were the only major black male stars at the time and Hollywood refused to pair her with a white man in a full-fledged screen romance. While Darryl Zanuck's controversial film Island in the Sun (1957) starring Dandridge and Belafonte was praised for its potential "to put colored film actors on a better footing in Hollywood and Britain" with its interracial love theme, the film failed to fully develop the romance between Dandridge and white co-star John Justin.³⁶ The trend continued throughout Dandridge's career. Aiming for diverse, challenging roles in her early career, Dandridge by the mid-1960's found herself hoping for any kind of work. Bankrupt and divorced from her fourth husband, Dandridge, 42, died from an over-dose of tranquilizers in 1965.³⁷

Star Identities

³⁶ Edward Scobie, "Finds 'Island in the Sun' Not Dimmed By Bias; Two Interracial 'Romances' Help Make Pix Unique," The Chicago Defender, February 9, 1957, 8. Dandridge and Justin do not kiss in the film even after they are married. While the revised Production Code of 1954 allowed for race mixing to be shown "within the limits of good taste" film producers continued to exercise extreme caution in depicting interracial romances. Louie Robinson, "Why Dandridge Can't Kiss Her White Film Lover: Torrid New Love Story Starts Interracial Love Code Debate," Jet, December 13, 1956: 60. Island in the Sun became the first of many films in which Dandridge was unable to fully act out a love affair with a white man. In 1958 she played an African slave loved by a white ship captain in Tamango, a French-produced film--the scene in which Dandridge kissed the German male lead Curd Jurgens was cut for US distribution. Dandridge continued to work steadily through her Golden Globe nominated role as Bess in Porgy and Bess in 1959. Over the next six years, no pictures materialized for Dandridge and her singing engagements began to taper off.

³⁷ Dorothy Dandridge's death remains an enigma. The coroner's office was unable to determine if she had committed suicide or made a mistake. According to Eddie Beale and other friends of Dandridge's, she was poised for a comeback at the time of her death. (Louie Robinson, "Dorothy Dandridge; Hollywood's Tragic Enigma," Ebony, March 1966: 72.

*Of the thousands called, two or three are chosen. Since the 1940's when Lena Horne marked the route, only a handful of Negro Entertainers have been admitted to the inner circle. Scores of others have broken through the ranks, strutted for a brief moment in the spotlight and fizzled out.*³⁸

Ebony, November 1957

Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge were two of the “chosen” few who managed to hold the spotlight and maintain the public’s attention during the course of their careers. Given the social climate of the time, Horne and Dandridge were able to rise to fame and to make a cultural impact because their skin color suggested that they were racially mixed. Because Horne and Dandridge were racial yet non-racial looking in the eyes of the mass audience, they were allowed a qualified acceptance in Hollywood. Nonetheless, by achieving fame as lighter-skinned stars, Horne, working outside the system and Dandridge, working within, were able to push the limits circumscribed by Hollywood, eventually helping to make space for future black stars.

Because of their similar coloring and their shared talents, Horne and Dandridge were often compared by the press. Yet, rather than focusing on the positive aspects of each woman’s talents, the press, as it has done with other black and white female stars, set Horne and Dandridge in opposition. This over-used mode of female star coverage underscores the gendered terms of stardom. While male stars can sustain their stardom throughout long careers and are, in a sense, allowed to co-exist collegially, female stars face short careers limited by age and marked by press coverage setting them in competition. Horne and Dandridge were no exception. Ebony, Jet, Our World, Life and Time ran rivalry-pieces on Horne and Dandridge. From Our World’s article stating that

³⁸ “What Makes a Star,” 145. Here Ebony, one of the leading African-American publications in the

Dandridge “has something La [sic]Horne lacks--pretty legs,” to speculations on their rivalry over studying under arranger Phil Moore, the press continually depicted the women in competition.³⁹ Headlines such as “Can Dandridge Outshine Horne?”, “Dandridge Replaces Horne as Top Negro Cinema Star” and “Is Lena Still Queen” appeared in the black press.⁴⁰

During the duration of the media-created rivalry, Horne and Dandridge made positive statements about each other in public; back-biting would only tarnish their stardom. In an ironic twist, Dandridge’s response to competing against Horne highlights the difficulties she would experience under the white star system along with the inherent complexities in constructing and maintaining a star identity. Dandridge, as the newer, younger star claimed she was a different type of performer than Horne. Self-effacingly contrasting herself to Horne, Our World reported that Dandridge described herself as a “simple girl, who wants only to be free to develop her personality, to train her voice and to be happy” while calling Horne “a seasoned performer.”⁴¹ In keeping with her quest to become a recognized actress, Dandridge admitted that outshining “the most popular Negro female song stylist” would be daunting but she would be willing to try if it didn’t “*destroy her freedom*” [my emphasis].⁴² The implication of Dandridge’s remark arguably reveals a desire to form an identity separate from the circumscribed constructions of race and gender and to free herself from upholding the banner of respectability mirrored in Horne’s star persona. Yet in attempting to navigate the

US, projects the values of the mainstream system of stardom.

³⁹ “Dorothy Dandridge Learns to Dance,” Our World, (December 1951) from Bogle’s Dorothy Dandridge, 202.

⁴⁰ “Can Dandridge Outshine Horne,” Our World, (June 1952): 28. The other article titles mentioned in Bogle are not specifically cited in his endnotes (202).

categories of identity and to move beyond Horne's initiatives in Hollywood, Dandridge ultimately lost the freedom she tried to hold on to.

In creating a media-rivalry between Horne and Dandridge, the black and white press invariably depicted the women's similarities--they both studied under Phil Moore, they both drew sold-out crowds at nightclubs, and they were both remarried to white men. Though their acts were markedly different, magazines played up "the striking resemblance between Dorothy and Lena" since both women had "the ability to wear clothes and [were] beautiful women."⁴³ The white press, undercutting the stars' individuality, also homogenized their appearances, referring to both of them as "glamorous" with "cafe au lait" or "copper" complexions. Some journalists even went as far as to make outlandish comments about their similar appearance. In *The Los Angeles Examiner* on May 9, 1950, Hollywood gossip-columnist Louella Parsons reported a phrase that resounded in the media for the next three years; "Dorothy looks very much like Lena Horne."⁴⁴ In equating Dandridge and Horne, the press delimited the amount of influence or stardom each woman could obtain separately. A closer examination of the women's separate star images reveals the different tactics Horne and Dandridge used to negotiate stardom and demonstrates their attempts to transgress racial and gender boundaries. It also points to patterns that reinforce the hypothesis of Horne as a star who returned to the circle of the black community and Dandridge as a movie star pushing the limits of the white star system.

⁴¹ "Can Dandridge Outshine Horne," 28.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 28.

Public Image

As Horne and Dandridge emerged as stars their appearances, performances, interviews, and photographs melded together in shaping their public star images. Because the public persona serves as the ultimate publicity vehicle, considering how Horne, as an African-American star, and Dandridge, as a transgressor of the white star system, represented themselves and were represented reveals not only their complex star images but also the ways in which they manipulated their stardom to make political gains. To fully understand how Horne's and Dandridge's star images evolved, and the role of race, gender and class in the formation of their images, it is useful to begin by examining the various strands of representation employed by white female stars working within the dominant Hollywood system. During the late 1940's and throughout the 1950's, images of white stars fell loosely into two categories--the love sex goddess, and the more wholesome girl-next-door, which taken a step further could yield a "lady." While these modes of representation seem dichotomous and at times were, they both shared a fixation on sex appeal--the love goddess oozed sexiness while the girl-next-door hinted at it with her beauty and charm. A brief look at the star images of Grace Kelly, Rita Hayworth, and Marilyn Monroe provides a starting point for unpacking these categories and the ways in which Horne and Dandridge used and subverted them.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Bogle, Dorothy Dandridge, 181.

⁴⁵ The category of "love sex goddess" was a term frequently used in the late 1940's and 1950's. The "girl-next-door" grouping was not a contemporary term. After researching the images of several white stars based on the top box office draws from 1942-1959, I found that these two categories, while not always applicable and invariably slippery, incorporated the representations of many prominent stars. In researching stars I looked for information on Betty Grable, Elizabeth Taylor, Rita Hayworth, Doris Day, Judy Garland, Claudette Colbert, Susan Hayworth, Ester Williams, Jane Wyman, Grace Kelly, and Jayne Mansfield. Grable, Day, Garland, Colbert, and Kelly seem to fit, though not neatly, into the girl-next-door category. Taylor, Hayworth, and Mansfield appear as sex-goddesses of sorts. I selected Kelly, Monroe, and Hayworth because of

The girl-next-door image, while not new in the 1940's and 1950's, was much emphasized in the face of changing roles for women brought on by World War II.⁴⁶ During the 1940's, several stars refashioned their images in response to the emerging domestic ideal that placed virtuous women in the home. In her study of American families in the Cold War era, Elaine Tyler May points out that "women's sexuality became increasingly central to their identity."⁴⁷ As a result, white female stars found themselves caught in their screen roles and private lives between the poles of good and bad sexuality delineated for the public by magazines, books, and film. These stars crafted their images under the societal assumptions that "sexy women who became devoted sweethearts or wives would contribute to the goodness of life" while those who used their sexuality for power or perhaps even pleasure risked being seen as a menace to men, their families, and even society.⁴⁸

In response to the prevailing domestic ideology dictating that women belonged in the home, female film stars began to portray a new model of womanhood. From photos of actresses such as Joan Crawford mopping her kitchen floor, to Photoplay articles written by Bette Davis urging readers to "not be afraid to be termed a 'prude'... [because]

their enormous popularity and because there are direct parallels between their star images and those of Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge.

⁴⁶ During World War II over six million women took jobs, increasing the size of the female labor force by 50%. As never before the media and the government supported women's entry into the work-force. Yet while many women continued to hold jobs after the war, the tide of public opinion changed drastically as women working, for some, came to represent "a threat to the cohesion and sanity of social life." Thus despite the changes in gender roles brought on by the war, traditional ideas about "women's place" continued to receive a large following. William H. Chafe, The Paradox of Change: American Women in the 20th Century. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 156.

Emerging out of the conservative domestic ideology in the late 1940's was an emphasis on female 'wholesomeness' that served as a limiting construct of how 'proper' women should behave.

⁴⁷ Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era. (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 63.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

[g]ood sports get plenty of rings on the telephone, but prudes get them on the finger,” several white stars adopted public personas constructed around the domestic ideal and ‘good’ sexuality.⁴⁹ While not completely synonymous, the domestic images and the girl-next-door representations depicted the same message of ‘good’ sexuality.

Within the confines of the girl-next-door image, Grace Kelly served as a representative, pushing the image to the level of ladyhood that defined Horne throughout her career. While Kelly became a star after Horne had left Hollywood, the similarities in their star images reveal not only the consistency of the representational trope, but more importantly the confluence of gender, race, and class in shaping their stardom. As classy, subtly sexy stars, these women’s images in many ways chafed against the love-goddess standard. The 1954 cover of Time underscored the contrast between the two dominant modes of female star representation; under the photograph of Kelly, the caption reads “Gentlemen prefer ladies” implying not “blondes” and specifically not the sex-goddess Monroe.⁵⁰ Like Lena Horne, ten years earlier, Kelly was described as a “cool beauty” and the press latched on to her upbringing: “Grace, daughter of a famous and wealthy Philadelphia family, scarcely needed fame or wealth but through her drive to be an actress seems destined to attain both.”⁵¹ Beautiful and classy, sexy and reserved, intelligent and friendly, Kelly, and Horne-- to the extent that a black woman could in a racist society dominated by old, negative ideas about black female’s sexuality-- embodied star images that represented the ideal of ‘good’ sexuality defined by domestic ideology.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 65.

⁵⁰ Time, January 3, 1955, cover. The caption is a take off on Monroe’s 1953 film Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.

⁵¹ “Hollywood’s Hottest Property,” Life, (April 26, 1954): 117.

Horne, tapping into a long established mode of representation reinvigorated by the war, was able to utilize the values of dominant white ideology to aid in her rise to fame. While she faced the problem of receiving full acceptance as a lady because of the assumptions made about black females by mass audiences, Horne managed, at least in the black press, to draw upon the benefits of being deemed a lady to enrich the African-American community as a role model.

The seeming antithesis to the girl-next-door was the love-goddess image utilized by Rita Hayworth and other stars in the late 1940's and early 1950's and taken to new heights by Marilyn Monroe. Toying with the conventions of 'good' sexuality, love-goddesses such as Hayworth and Monroe shed images of prudery to present sex "as a sugar-frosted dream of romance."⁵² Representing on one level, 'bad' sexuality, however tamed in comparison to the raw sexuality displayed in the 1930's, the goddesses reigned in many ways "as the deit[ies] of [Americans'] popular religion," by emphasizing the ideal that "sex is the most important thing in the world and that it leads to eternal happiness."⁵³ On the love-goddess continuum, Rita Hayworth, recognized for her "an inner sensuality" and the "undefinable glamour" she marshalled on screen to titillate audiences, served as the embodiment of the ideal, reaping the benefits of her sexy image throughout the 1940's and 1950's.⁵⁴ While Hayworth portrayed some steamy characters on screen, posed for sassy photographs, and emitted a strong sense of sex appeal on and

⁵² Winthrop Sargeant, "The Cult of The Love Goddess in America," *Life*, June, 5, 1950: 81.

⁵³ Ibid. In comparison to the sexy stars of the 1930's including Mae West, the love goddesses of the 1940's and early 1950's appeared in many ways 'cleaned up'. The overt raunchiness capitalized on by some female stars before the enforcement of the Production Code in 1933 evolved into a softer, domesticated image in the post-war period. Nonetheless the love-goddess images, however tamed from earlier representations, stood in contrast to the ideal of 'good' sexuality embodied in the girl-next-door.

off screen, it was Marilyn Monroe who took the love-goddess image to the extreme, boldly embracing and displaying her sexuality in ways not seen before.

As a black woman operating within a white system and as the “first and only authentic Negro love goddess,” Dandridge’s choices in crafting her image raise important issues about her star identity as well as her professional and political goals.⁵⁵ Dandridge, a friend of Monroe’s, encouraged the starlet to be proud of her nude photos, which eventually catapulted Monroe to controversial fame and allowed her a type of qualified sexual freedom contemporaries could not match.⁵⁶ Dandridge, like other love-goddesses, posed for suggestive photographs that while sexy did not portray her as promiscuous. Aware of the long-held notion of black women as sexually indiscriminate, Dandridge tempered her love-goddess image in an effort to present herself as sexy but respectable. Unable and perhaps unwilling to cross the line to uninhibited sexual iconography like Monroe, Dandridge drew on different strains from the love-goddess imagery, and at times the girl-next-door representational mode, in mediating her star image.

Dandridge’s 1957 lawsuit against Confidential underscores the challenges she faced in managing her love-goddess image, with its implications of immediate gratification, and her desire to become a respected--and even respectable--star in

⁵⁴ Gene Ringgold, “The Films of Rita Hayworth: The Legend and Career of a Love Goddess.” (Secaucus, N.J.: The Citadel Press, 1980): 11.

⁵⁵ Louie Robinson, “Dorothy Dandridge, Hollywood’s Tragic Engima,” *Ebony* (March 1966), p. 71.

⁵⁶ Bogle, Dorothy Dandridge, 180. Dandridge and Monroe met at the Actor’s Lab in Hollywood. They also both studied under Phil Moore. In 1950, Monroe came to Dandridge and Moore with the news that “risqué” photographs of her were being released by a photographer Tom Kelley. Both Dandridge and Moore commented that the photographs were beautiful and reassured her that they couldn’t imagine how the photographs could impair her career. Hugh Hefner published the Marilyn nudes in his first issue of Playboy in 1953. (180). For more information on the nude

Hollywood. In an article entitled “What Dorothy Dandridge Did in the Woods” the popular, scandal-oriented magazine reported that Dandridge had a romp in the woods near Lake Tahoe, California with white band leader Dan Terry. The steamy write-up alerted “ambitious wolves who set the stage with champagne, caviar and gypsy fiddles” when on the make to reconsider their strategy because the “suave sirens are going back to nature.” Setting Dandridge’s alleged liaison in the woods in opposition to her image “as the last word in sophistication” the article claimed that she only needed “open sky and some green grass on the turf” to take part in “passionate preliminaries.”⁵⁷

Dandridge, angered by the article, which presented her as willing to have sex anytime, anywhere, with anyone, tried to reign in her sexy image by suing the publication. While Eartha Kitt, Billy Holiday and many other black and white celebrities had been maligned and at times misrepresented by Confidential and other magazines, few took legal action.⁵⁸ Dandridge, trying to repair her image, complained publicly about the magazine’s lies and began legal proceedings. Perhaps because of her precarious position in the white star system, Dandridge took great pains to clear her name and reputation; unlike other defendants in the case, she followed the protracted legal battle for weeks, eventually testifying in court with Maureen O’Hara against the magazine. When asked by Confidential’s attorney whether she had walked in the woods with Terry, Dandridge used the opportunity to point a finger not only at the magazine but also at the prevalence of racial discrimination in America: “Negroes were not permitted to socialize with White

photographs see David Halberstam’s “Discovering Sex” in American Heritage, May/June 1993, 39-58.

⁵⁷ “What Dorothy Dandridge Did,” Confidential, May 1957 quoted in Bogle’s Dorothy Dandridge, 374.

people. I would not have ridden with Terry anyway because of the prejudice. I wouldn't have been seen with him."⁵⁹

After a long fight Dandridge triumphed, becoming the first star to win a suit against Confidential. Yet despite her victory, questions about her reputation surfaced in the press during the trial with The Chicago Defender calling Dandridge "either innocent or very game."⁶⁰ Straddling the representational lines of the love-goddess and the girl-next-door Dandridge worked to mediate her image(s)--circumscribed to some extent by her race and gender-- to achieve success. Keeping in mind the dominant modes of star representation in Hollywood, and the different star systems, as well as the discriminatory attitudes towards African-Americans, we now turn to the ways in which Horne, Dandridge and the press constructed their star personas.

For Horne and Dandridge whose stardom was supported by their musical performances and their ability to "sell sex with a song," sex appeal was a key component in forming their star images.⁶¹ Yet as demonstrated earlier, Horne's sex appeal was tempered by her association as a lady. A vivid example of the difference between the women's star images comes from two covers of the NAACP's Crisis (See Illustrations, Figures 1 and 2). On the June 1942 cover, eighteen year-old Dorothy Dandridge stands side-ways in a large tree. She is wearing short shorts that accentuate her extended left leg.

⁵⁸ It is arguable that many stars did sue the magazine because of the risk of revealing other additional personal information during the legal proceedings.

⁵⁹ Bogle, Dorothy Dandridge, 389. Dandridge's battle with Confidential resurfaced after the magazine offered her \$10,000 to settle out of court. They accused Dandridge of using the settlement as proof of her innocence in representing the case to the press. Dandridge's statement against racial segregation was ironic in light of her 1959 marriage to white cafe owner Jack Denison.

⁶⁰ "Dorothy Dandridge Either Innocent or Very Game," The Chicago Defender, September 14, 1957, p. 19.

⁶¹ "Can Dandridge Outshine Lena Horne," p. 29.

Her right leg is bent and her head is turned over her left shoulder as she smiles into the camera. Not yet a movie star, Dandridge's photograph is consistent with the Crisis's focus on "non-narrative, non-narratized performers" and black stars such as athletes, dancers and musicians that frequently appeared on Crisis covers.⁶² The caption, coupled with the photograph reveals the dichotomy in representation that would continue throughout Dandridge's career. Miss Dandridge "smiles a welcome to the NAACP Conference delegates and to the whole USA...She was in Duke Ellington's recent *Jump for Joy* and several weeks ago was selected as the sweetheart of the Seventh Regiment, California Guard."⁶³ The photograph depicts Dandridge as young but not quite innocent--the pose and the outfit suggest a subtle sexiness. Her connection with the NAACP Conference and her performance in a political musical are trivialized in favor of her sex appeal.

Seven months later, Lena Horne, already an eminent star, appeared on the cover of the Crisis for the second time. The photograph shows Horne from the shoulders up in a modest top as she looks assuredly to the left. Here is a sophisticated lady. Noted for her nightclub performances first, Horne is depicted as a classy, singing star and praised for making history: "This is the first time a colored singer (not an orchestra) has been booked in a hotel of the class of the Savoy-Plaza."⁶⁴ Reinforcing the notion of Horne as a black star, the caption relegates her role in Cabin in the Sky to a brief line at the end of the paragraph. Three years later the magazine ran a feature article on Horne, detailing her

⁶² Knight 33.

⁶³ Crisis, (June 1942): 182.

⁶⁴ Crisis, (January 1943): 7.

work with the Negro College Fund--these characteristics of Horne as an activist, a singer, and a lady served as the basis of her star image.⁶⁵

The photographs of the two women in the Crisis accurately encapsulate how the press and other performers saw and depicted Horne and Dandridge--Horne as a beautiful and sophisticated lady--Dandridge as sassy and sexy. They also serve as a reminder that the stars, as well as the press, could shape and/or mutually enforce the star's public identity.

The representations in the press in many ways mirror the differing tactics the women used in their performances. Horne strove for a glamorous, icy demeanor. As Donald Bogle notes "the essence of Horne's appeal was... her aloof, sometimes brilliantly cold, emotionally distant, contemplative beauty."⁶⁶ According to Horne, her iciness was a performance strategy she developed to protect herself: "I developed a certain kind of guile and toughness, a way of isolating myself from the audience. It is a means of not letting them get to you, not letting them see that they can hurt you.... The image I have chosen to give them is of a woman they can't reach."⁶⁷ Although she was acknowledged as one of the "sexiest-looking" women in the world, Horne did not make sex appeal the basis of her performance persona--she focused on an untouchable image instead.⁶⁸

The black and white press upheld Horne's image, and added to it, by depicting her as "glamorous," "beautiful," and "intelligent." There was no question that Horne was "sexy," but the black and white press focused on other characteristics of her star image.

⁶⁵ "Glamorous Lena Horne Backs College Fund Drive, Crisis (April 1945): 138.

⁶⁶ Bogle, Dorothy Dandridge, 116.

⁶⁷ Horne, 42.

In the December 8, 1947 issue of Time, a reviewer covering Horne's Continental debut in Paris described Horne as a wholesome lady: "Lena was *not the kind of girl* to come on-stage the way Josephine Baker had, with only a string of bananas girding her hips" [emphasis mine]. Instead, Horne, the exemplar of a lady, appeared on stage dressed in a "square-shouldered white gown, flashed her magnificent teeth in the spotlight and curtsied demurely."⁶⁹ Here Horne is the model of grace and modesty, distancing herself from the wild, sexy Jo Baker and proving herself the epitome of the girl-next-door.

African-American publications and performers also depicted Horne as a lady. She was noted for her subtle sexiness but more frequently drew comments on her beauty and goodness. A passage written by Duke Ellington effectively captures the characteristics of Horne's star image that made headlines in the black press. Commenting on the "Most Exciting Women I've Known" for Ebony in 1951, Ellington wrote, "There are several Lenas, all exciting. I think Lena deserved to become a symbol of the race." Emanating both inner and outer beauty, Horne was also described as "good," and "wise". Not one to overlook sex appeal, Ellington highlighted the complexity of Horne's image by also stating that "She is sex....She is beauty and the beast, Lena is because she is the good in all of us and the animal in us all."⁷⁰ Expanding and reshaping the circumscribed representations of the white girl-next-door image, Horne crafted a complicated image that she used to draw attention to racial discrimination.

⁶⁸ "Lena Horne," Jet (December 27, 1951): 34. Ava Gardner declared Lena "the sexiest-looking woman I have ever seen." Famed portrait artist John Vogel described Horne as "the most beautiful woman in the world."

⁶⁹ "Lena in Paris," Time, (December 8, 1947): 68.

⁷⁰ "Duke Ellington, "The Most Exciting Women I've Known," Ebony, (April 1952): 25.

In promoting Horne, the black press defined her as a role model. To reveal her “goodness” the black press worked hard to hierarchize her private image over her performance identity. Ebony, in particular focused on Horne, in their effort to consistently depict “working wives and mothers in a positive, and frequently heroic light.”⁷¹ A 1946 article in Ebony made a distinct division between Horne’s multiple images: “Lena’s a far cry from the sexy Georgia Brown she played in Cabin in the Sky. She’s never had a bubble bath in her life. She doesn’t smoke and she doesn’t drink.”⁷² As a final emphasis on her dichotomous images, the article undermined the press hype on Horne; “The ‘glamorous, exciting Lena Horne’ as she is called in press agents’ blurbs spends more evenings at home than she does out.”⁷³ Here Lena’s role as a practical, domestic woman takes precedent over her appeal as a sex symbol.

Dandridge’s public star image moved in a different direction than Horne’s as she blurred the lines between the love-sex goddess she often played on screen and the girl-next-door she seemed to want to be. In an effort to fight shyness, Dandridge offered mediated images of herself that were tailored to the customers’ desires in her nightclub performances. Dandridge attended a psychology class at UCLA in an effort “to find out what made people tick.”⁷⁴ Claiming to click with customers because she could psychoanalyze them, Dandridge worked to mold her performance to the personality of the

⁷¹ Jacqueline Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present. (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 269.

⁷² “Meet the Real Lena Horne, Ebony, (November 1947): 9.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ “Weekly Almanac,” Jet, (November 29, 1951): 15.

crowd. Working the crowd, she could “spot the different types” and would “pick a special song for each type.”⁷⁵

Dandridge also used the concept of sex appeal as a trope in her performances. According to Life, Dandridge became a top attraction in nightclubs because of a “new and apparently surefire formula for her show.”⁷⁶ In monologue and song, Dandridge acted out 25 minutes of her transformation from demure girl-next-door to uninhibited sex goddess. The reviewer, tapping into racial and gendered stereotypes, added to Dandridge’s representation of herself by describing her “*puma-lithe* figure” and “her voice like silver bells with *sex appeal*” [emphasis mine].⁷⁷ In contrast to Horne’s aloofness, Dandridge worked to form a connection with the audience: “The idea with Dandridge was--Here she is. You can try to touch if you dare.”⁷⁸

Throughout her career, Dandridge, as an African-American love-goddess, drew continuous comments and compliments from the black and white press on her sexiness. A photograph that neatly sums up sex appeal as the foundation of Dandridge’s star image appeared in the June 1954 issue of Esquire prior to the release of Carmen Jones (See Illustrations, Figure 3). The “magazine for men” selected a different “Fair Lady” each month who appeared in a full color fold-out. Photographer Philippe Halsam depicts a sensuous Dandridge dressed in a low-cut sleeveless gown lying on a bed with a satin bedspread. As the eye moves from right to left, we see Dandridge seductively looking at the camera, lips slightly parted with one arm above her head. Moving to the left we see her bare shoulders and shapely hips that are set off by a form-fitting champagne-colored

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ “Life Story in Song, Dorothy Dandridge Shows Last Stage,” Life (March 23, 1953): 129.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

brocade gown. Her pose, the satin bed-covering, and the dress combine to portray Dandridge as a sultry sex symbol. Yet, bearing in mind that this photograph came out a year after Marilyn Monroe's nudes hit the stands in Playboy, the steamy but somewhat elegant photograph of Dandridge perhaps symbolizes the way in which she cultivated an alluring image while trying to avoid the stereotype of black woman as lustful creature.

Other magazines also played up Dandridge's sex appeal. In 1951 Dandridge, along with Horne, was voted one of the "World's Sexiest Negro Women" by Jet magazine. While Horne was voted no.1 it was Dandridge who received the sizzling write up. The reviewer described Dorothy as the "hip-tossing, torchy vocalist" who was the newest glamour girl.⁷⁹ Ebony also noticed Dandridge's sex appeal, entitling a 1953 review article "Seductive Singer Captivates Hollywood Mocambo." Billing Dandridge as "a volume of sex with living impact of the Kinsey report," the reviewer made a more subtle insinuation about Dandridge's character when he noted that she made no objection to the management suggestively allowing cigarette girls to sell copies of the Kinsey report at \$15 each during her performance.⁸⁰ Most likely referring to Alfred Kinsey's second controversial study on sex entitled "Sexual Behavior in the Human Female" published in 1953, Dandridge added to the steaminess of her performance by connecting herself with the report. Kinsey's report, which excluded black women, incited controversy because of its subject matter and content--it showed that 26% of the women interviewed had extra-marital affairs and the number of women who masturbated had increased 10% over the

⁷⁸ Bogle, Dorothy Dandridge, 116.

⁷⁹ "The World's Sexiest Negro Women," Jet, (December 27, 1951): 33. The other women listed were Marva Louis, Ruby Dulles and Katherine Nunham.

⁸⁰ "Seductive Singer Captivates Hollywood Mocambo" Ebony, (December 1953): 100.

past two generations.⁸¹ As she crooned sultry songs, and wiggled her hips to the rhythm, audience members could watch her and then read about female sexuality, a combination targeted toward titillation with Dandridge as the embodiment of sex appeal.

Dandridge added to her alluring star image by writing about sex appeal for Ebony. Differentiating herself from other performers, Dandridge “unlike most girl-singers” was not afraid to talk about sex appeal or sex.⁸² In direct contrast to white girl-next-door stars who advocated prudery, Dandridge boldly expressed her opinions on sex appeal and proper behavior for women stating that the “women who get the most out of life are those who are not afraid to give.” Enforcing Dandridge’s sexy star persona, the author commented that “Dorothy does not define too specifically what she means by ‘giving.’”⁸³ Breaking the conventions of appropriate behavior for women dictated by the 1950’s gender ideology, Dandridge went on to state that “sex is one of the basic instincts in life and that life would be more exciting to millions if they would only realize this.”⁸⁴ Using sex appeal as the cornerstone of her star image, Dandridge and the press constructed her identity as a sex symbol--not a role model.

⁸¹ Kinsey contended that he left African-Americans out of his report because of difficulties in finding college educated women who would participate in the study. Out of 8000 successful interviews conducted for the book, only 954 were with African-American women. To avoid presenting a misleading picture by relying on inconclusive research done mainly with members of one class, he opted to make his second volume, like his first, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, “lily white.” According to Ebony Negro women avoided answering questions about their sexuality in order to avoid perpetuating stereotypes. New York psychologist Kenneth Clark argued that women’s reticence to tell the truth about sex is a “reaction to the stereotypes which are so common about Negroes--such as being sexually loose. They feel under pressure to show that the usual theories about them are false. They bend over backwards to give the impression of restraint and inhibition in their sex lives.” “Why Negro Women are Not in The Kinsey Report.” Ebony, (September 1953): 111.

⁸² “Don’t Be Afraid of Sex Appeal, Says Dorothy Dandridge” Ebony, (May 1952): 24.

⁸³ Ibid, 25.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

In crafting their star images Horne and Dandridge, like other stars, relied on publicity. As Richard Dyer points out, publicity is important because “in its apparent or actual escape from the image that Hollywood is trying to promote, it seems more ‘authentic’.”⁸⁵ By examining the “real” identities of stars we can begin to “read the tensions between the star-as-person and her image, tensions which at another level become themselves crucial to the image.”⁸⁶ Keeping in mind that stars continue to construct their image even in behind-the-scenes interviews, an examination of “authentic” images of self contributes to the investigation of the star persona.

In a series of articles in Ebony from 1946-1968, Lena Horne offered details about her private life. These articles depict Horne’s naturalness as they attempt to show her as a down-to-earth mother rather than as a glamorous, worldly woman. By playing on domestic ideology and manipulating white representational modes, Horne constructed a positive role-model image. In a “Day in Hollywood with Lena Horne,” published by Ebony in 1946, Horne claimed that she was a “home type.” There is a large picture of her with an apron on cooking dinner. In this article and others, Horne presents herself as a mother first and a performer second defining herself as a “working mother.”⁸⁷ Later in an article on motherhood she wrote for Ebony, Horne renounced her stardom by defining her role as a mother as her main goal in life: “I’m proud to be a mother....I never wanted to become a star. I only wanted to be a good mother, and to help support my children and prepare them for life.”⁸⁸ Finally, assessing her life in 1953, Horne claimed that

⁸⁵ Richard Dyer, Stars (London: British Film Institute, 1979), 69.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 70.

⁸⁷ “A Day in the Life of Lena Horne,” Ebony, (March 1946): 20.

⁸⁸ Lena Horne, “I’m Proud to Be a Mother,” Ebony, (March 1959): 57.

“[m]otherhood has been the most wonderful, stimulating and rewarding experience for me.”⁸⁹

Dandridge’s private identity serves as a startling contrast to Horne’s. Where the black press represented Horne as a practical, down to earth lady, it depicted Dandridge in a very different way. Instead of publishing behind-the-scenes photographs of Dandridge cooking or reading as they did with Horne, the black press highlighted Dandridge’s glamorous lifestyle. In “The Private World of Dorothy Dandridge,” Louie Robinson concentrates on the finery of Dandridge’s home which she redecorated herself. “The house, by decor and atmosphere, is cool and elegant with a note of restraint, an extension of the personality of its owner.”⁹⁰ Although Robinson explains that the private Dorothy is “hardly the same woman who, as Carmen Jones, drove Harry Belafonte to destruction,” he is unable to learn about the “real” Dorothy. He recites the details of her life as a performer but ends the article by explaining that “there is still an air of mystery about her as though some invisible glass shield has protected her from the most inquiring visitor.”⁹¹ It is arguably this shield that Dandridge employed to present herself as a star at all times--the glamorous woman in the movies needed to be seen as a star at home. Competing within the white Hollywood system, Dandridge always seemed to put her celebrity image forward--using it to define her private and public self. In doing so she left Louie Robinson and many others who interviewed her feeling that they had “been exposed to a genuine star.”⁹²

⁸⁹ Ibid. There is also an article in Ebony from September 1953 entitled “Lena’s Sense of Motherhood Strong as She Grows Older” that depicts Horne as a devoted mother, p. 68.

⁹⁰ Louie Robinson, “The Private World of Dorothy Dandridge,” Ebony (June 1962): 116.

⁹¹ Ibid, 121.

⁹² Ibid.

While Horne used motherhood to define her private and public self, Dandridge separated her star image from her painful maternal experience. The image of love-goddess did not carry over into her role as a mother as it did with Rita Hayworth and Lana Turner. Throughout the majority of her career, Dandridge refused to discuss her daughter Harolyn who suffered from severe brain damage at birth. Plagued by feelings of guilt and inadequacy as a parent, Dandridge kept silent on her child's condition and her parenting skills. She eventually placed Harolyn in a state hospital after leaving her with a full-time care-giver for years.

After many years of refusing to answer questions about her daughter, Dandridge broke her silence on the Mike Douglas show in 1963. Playing an activist role that the press often overlooked, Dandridge traced Harolyn's life from birth through her entrance into a state mental hospital at age 17. On live television Dandridge was seen "peeling off her Hollywood veneer and letting the compassion that is in a mother's heart shine through."⁹³ Appearing with Dr. Gunnar Dwybad of the National Association for Mentally Retarded Children, Dandridge joined him in urging parents to seek information from physicians and mental health organizations. Her appearance on the Mike Douglas show was a rare moment in which Dorothy Dandridge separated herself from her star image in public.

While Dandridge did open up and speak about her tragic experience with motherhood, it seems likely that even had Harolyn been normal, Dandridge would not

⁹³ Charles L. Sanders, "Daughter Never Recognized Actress as Her Mother," *Jet*, (August 22, 1963): 22. It is also arguable that Dandridge appeared on television to talk about Harolyn because her career was waning and she needed the press. I find it more plausible that she finally had come to terms with the situation and was willing to use her fame to help raise money for retarded children.

have based her star identity on motherhood. Defined as a performer who did not attract attention in Hollywood “until she adopted her [new] style of combining an intimate voice and clever lyrics with a *whole raft of sex appeal*,”[emphasis mine] Dandridge seemed unable to transcend her star image as sex symbol and present her other selves.⁹⁴

The pivotal difference in Horne’s and Dandridge’s image was their expression of politics. Horne’s primarily middle-class upbringing and early exposure to activism helped shape her attitude toward racial politics--speaking out was a family tradition. Horne made a conscious decision to fuse her politics with her stardom. By doing so, she solidified her position as a black star, mirroring the steps of the star dance by returning to the community circle. Using her stardom and the politics of conservative representation, Horne subverted the conventions of white stardom by continually trying to expand and fortify the circle of the black community by promoting racial politics nationally.

Horne’s political activities expanded beyond resistance to the white Hollywood star system. Claiming that she was not going “to waste time waiting around” for better parts in Hollywood, Horne resisted the dominant star system by ripping up her MGM contract and performing as a star on her own terms.⁹⁵ As a singer she was able to return to the black community and use her position to garner support for political activities. Because she operated as a star within an African-American model, Horne was able to survive HUAC’s accusations of communist tendencies and flourish, becoming increasingly popular despite Hollywood’s snub. Likewise, Horne used her images, both public and private, to push for change. Depicting the complexities of her star persona, Horne could appear in one article as a quiet domestic type while later appearing as an

⁹⁴ “Seductive Star Captures Mocambo,” 100.

outspoken activist, attending rallies and voicing complaints about racism that she knew would be published. Effectively combining the dichotomous images, Horne described to Ebony magazine her ultimate humiliation--having her children called “niggers” at school.⁹⁶

In performing, Horne also stood by her politics often refusing to perform at segregated clubs. As a devoted member of the NAACP, the National Council of Negro Women and several other organizations, Horne attended fund-raisers, gave speeches, sang freedom songs with members of SNCC, and much more--all the while drawing attention to the causes she promoted through her stardom. The black press took pains to emphasize Horne’s activism, again representing her as a role model. Jet, Ebony, and the Crisis all reported on Horne’s political activities including her involvement in the NAACP, and her participation in the National Council for Negro Women. The white press remained silent on her activism. Instead of promoting her political activities by reporting on them, the white press focused on Horne’s performances and stardom rather than highlighting her role as a political activist. By failing to acknowledge her activism, the white press attempted to limit Horne’s influence and the power of her stardom thus underscoring her position as a star outside of the white Hollywood system.

Dandridge, growing up in a lower class family, was not exposed to direct political activism early on--nor did she wholly embrace activism as part of her star identity. Nevertheless, Dandridge did have strong political views, expressed locally, that were overlooked by the black and white press. Because she was striving to be an actress, Dandridge knew she had to contend with the rules of the white Hollywood system. Yet in

⁹⁶ Ponchitta Pierce, “Lena at 51,” Ebony, (July 1968): 126.

her compliance, Dandridge managed to resist. Shunning the advice of her mother to avoid politics, Dandridge joined the Hollywood Democratic Committee which was composed mainly of liberals and Hollywood radicals.⁹⁷ Dandridge was also a member of the Actor's Lab, a group of black and white actors known for their liberal attitudes. When Hedda Hopper wrote a scathing article in *The Los Angeles Times* on the social fraternization of the group that included "dancing between Whites and Negroes," Dorothy took action.⁹⁸ Contacting the *California Eagle*, a black newspaper, she challenged Hopper and other critics of the Lab stating that "[a]s an actress and student at the Lab, I am anxious to know if Mr. Henagahan (and others) considers the democratic policy of the Actors Lab wherein students are selected on the basis of ability, rather than on the color of their skin, a subversive policy."⁹⁹

In other ways, Dandridge promoted better opportunities for African-Americans. While politics were not the focus of her life, she did advocate for change in small, but not trivial, ways. When asked by *Jet* magazine about her New Year's Resolution for 1956, Dandridge resolved "to endeavor in my own small way to widen the horizons for others of my race, to try sincerely to be a credit to my people at all times."¹⁰⁰ Dandridge also spoke out against prejudice in the *New York Post*. Having experienced discrimination in Hollywood and elsewhere, Dandridge explained that prejudice saddened her-- "it was

⁹⁶ "Lena Riled By Racists Whether White or Negro," *Ebony* (November 1947): 12.

⁹⁷ Bogle, *Dorothy Dandridge*, 134.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 156. Quoted from The Hedda Hopper Column, "Out of Character," *The Los Angeles Times*, September 16, 1948.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 157. It is notable that Dandridge choose to air her complaint against Hopper in a Black publication rather than risking airing her grievance against one of the most powerful film critics in Hollywood in a white publication.

¹⁰⁰ "New Year's Resolutions of Famous People," *Jet*, (February 26, 1956) from Bogle, 344.

such a waste. It makes you lopy and half-alive. It gives you nothing. It takes away. And it is superficial like so many of our reactions today.”¹⁰¹

Dandridge also practiced politics in everyday forms of resistance. She strutted through the whites-only lobby of a Las Vegas hotel, refused to take the service elevator after a performance and demanded service at segregated restaurants. Because Dandridge aspired to be an actress in a system dominated by whites, she had to practice her politics cautiously. Though she was not an outspoken activist, Dandridge did manage to resist the bounds of white stardom in certain ways. Her acts of racial resistance along with her attempt to obtain solid dramatic roles in Hollywood demonstrate Dandridge’s attempts to participate in as well as contest the white Hollywood star system.

Epilogue

Today the star images of Horne and Dandridge continue to resonate. In December 1997, Lena Horne, looking amazingly young at age 80, showed her hip side by singing a Christmas carol on a Gap commercial. Dandridge also resurfaced; her life story began reappearing in the press with the publication of Donald Bogle’s biography. The black press began covering the search for the most qualified actress to play Dandridge after Whitney Houston purchased the book rights from Bogle. With the publication of the biography and the hype over who should play Dandridge in “the role of a lifetime” in an upcoming bio-pic, journalists have begun revisiting the star’s death and raising the old question of suicide.¹⁰² The fact that Horne and Dandridge are still known today--Horne for her long singing career and more recently for her 1981 Grammy for her performance

¹⁰¹ Bogle, Dorothy Dandridge, 309.

in Lena Horne: The Lady and Her Music and Dandridge as a tragic sex symbol who failed to win the battle against the white forces in Hollywood--emphasizes the resilience of their star images.

Considering their star images in depth has revealed Horne and Dandridge's ultimate role--beyond their jobs as singers and actresses they acted-- at times ambiguously-- as racial and gender rebels using their stardom to improve conditions for African-Americans in Hollywood and in society. Through different constructions of their images and trajectories of stardom, Horne and Dandridge broke new ground by advocating for civil rights at a time when women, and in particular black women, occupied the lowest rung in (white) societal thinking. Horne, a black star who functioned primarily outside of Hollywood proved invincible--her star continued rising after she left Hollywood. The "happy" light-hearted nature of her film roles as well as her image as an "entertainer" seem to mirror her personal identity and the trajectory of her stardom-- her return to the black community had a happy ending. Freed from the Hollywood system, yet complicit in using its tropes of representation, she was able to promote and be promoted as a "good" person--a role model--a lady, an activist, a mother, and a legend. These images coupled with her decision to use stardom for political purposes demonstrate Horne's seemingly successful attempt to expand the circle and to strengthen it by promoting the rights of African-Americans.

Dandridge, in trying to break the barriers that Horne had begun to wear down, selected another set of weapons to fight her battle. Merging her private and public images, Dandridge attempted to be a star--always--by embodying the qualities she defined and

¹⁰² Ebony, (August 1997): 66.

was defined by--Dandridge promoted herself as an intelligent, sexy woman. Her individuality, like Horne's, reflects the star image she created and that was created for her by her roles and the press. Like the characters Carmen and Bess, Dandridge's "private" life and career were tragic. Her child was retarded, she was clinically depressed, bankrupt, divorced, and without work in Hollywood when she died. Dandridge's life became the mirror image of the tragic mulattos she played in the movies ending with her early death at age 42.

The melodrama of Dandridge's career does not detract from the importance of her stardom. If anything the sexiness of her star image and the tragedy of her death have promoted the staying power of her image. The tumultuous swings of her life and career as well as her attempts at pushing the bounds of the Hollywood system are being appreciated today perhaps more so than they were in her lifetime--after several years, black stars are beginning to recognize Dandridge as a black pioneer who advocated for political change for African-Americans by entering, staying, and shining briefly in the white Hollywood system.

The trajectory of Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge's stardom moved in different directions. As two individuals coming from separate backgrounds Horne and Dandridge fashioned unique responses to the strictures of the Hollywood star system. Horne metaphorically stepped to the center of the star dance circle, revealed her individuality and returned to the outer circle, fortifying it with her actions, image and activism--in her return she left space for the next performer. Dandridge, moving in another direction, used her stardom to transcend the circle. As Horne struggled to expand the circle of the black community as a black star, Dandridge attempted to extend and

improve the white Hollywood star system by bridging the gap between blacks and whites through integration. Today the impact of Horne and Dandridge's stardom resonates as African-American stars continue in different ways to fill the gap between the black and white star systems. Their legacy as racial and gender rebels provides an entree into examining the possibilities and ramifications of celebrities marshalling their image(s) for political change.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure

1. June 1942 Cover of The Crisis with Dorothy Dandridge
2. January 1943 Cover of The Crisis with Lena Horne
3. Photo from June 1954 issue of Esquire with Dorothy Dandridge as the Fair Lady of the Month



ASSETS: \$26,849,788

The story of Negro
life insurance companies

M. S. Stuart

QUARTERMASTER DEPOT

A picture story from Philadelphia

Lania D. Gavin and Gaston Devigne

"MOONLIGHT COCKTAIL"

Lucky Roberts's song hit

George S. Schuyler

Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 3



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VITA

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